

Burr (H.)

DR. BURR'S ADDRESS

TO

THE CANDIDATES

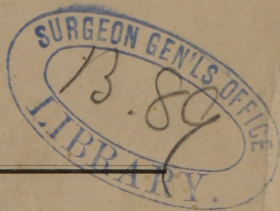
FOR THE

DEGREE OF DOCTOR IN MEDICINE,

IN THE

Medical Institution of Yale College,

January 14th, 1864.



THE
ANNUAL ADDRESS TO THE CANDIDATES

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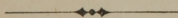
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BY HORACE BURR, M. D.,

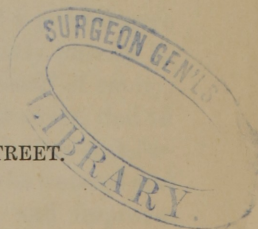
IN BEHALF OF THE BOARD OF EXAMINERS.



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A D D R E S S .

IF the powers and faculties of the human mind were perfectly symmetrical, and in a state of equilibrium naturally, it would still be a great and lifelong work to improve and carry them on to a more perfect development. How great then the necessity, in its present condition of irregularity and one-sidedness, that watchful, thorough, and persevering self-culture should be pursued by you, in order that you may come up to the full measure of usefulness in the profession to which you have devoted yourselves.

Hitherto, you have been under instructors operating from without, informing you of facts and principles necessary to fit you to begin your professional career, and have been mostly dependent upon them for ideas and opinions.

But you are now to be thrown mainly upon your own resources. Your communings are to be chiefly with yourselves.

Your own intellect and heart are to be brought to bear upon the ever-varying circumstances around you, in the pursuit of a calling which, if properly followed, must necessarily keep them in constant and active exercise. The first requisite to a judicious and effective self-culture, is, thorough self-knowledge; and this is to be attained by habitual self-examination, and constant watchfulness of the workings of our intellectual and moral processes.

Self-knowledge, in its perfect and absolute sense, is of all knowledge the most difficult of attainment, but a good degree of it is within the reach of every one who earnestly pursues it.

But in order to this, it is necessary to divest oneself of vanity, self-conceit and self-pride, and to admit to ourselves, that in the workings of every human soul there is much that is defective, much to be restrained, and many things to be fostered and guided. Self-examination, and self-correction, and improve-

ment must go hand in hand all our lives, for we shall find, that however many may be our victories, and whatever advances we may have made, time and circumstances will be continually producing new causes for renewed exertion.

It would be impossible, and it is unnecessary, for me to point out all the defects to which you may be liable, or specify all the instances in which genial nourishment or thorough pruning may be required. But I will mention briefly some of the more important, leaving it to each individual to apply, and carry out the general principle, in his own case.

One of the most common, and perhaps the most fatal to true success, is, a natural or habitual defect of the faculty of investigation, whether applied to the phenomena of individual disease, and the operation of medicines, or to general characteristics of diathesis, and epidemic and endemic influences, and the widely extended field of the mysterious working of the various diseases incident to human existence, and the unnumbered causes influencing them.

Whatever may be the original or present cause of this want in the intellect of any physician, he should arouse himself for its removal, or relinquish at once a pursuit which he cannot follow with innocence to himself or safety to those who might unfortunately confide in his skill.

Of course it is not to be expected that all will be equally gifted with this important faculty; for both nature and education will make men to differ in this as in other respects; but no one can be essentially defective in it, and expect success. Happily, this is greatly susceptible of cultivation, and the comparative want of it is not hard to be discovered by any one who will watch carefully the natural tendency of his mind, and observe whether he is inclined to search and examine, or jump at conclusions, and take things for granted.

The mortifying discovery of radical or habitual defect of intellect, must precede in this, as in all other cases, any decided effort towards improvement; but that very discovery is a great and important first lesson, and the mere setting out is a good way on the road. Much may be done to strengthen the capacity for thorough investigation, by turning the mind to the

study of nature in other aspects than those connected with the proper science of medicine; and whoever becomes earnestly interested in the nature and habits of the animal and vegetable world around him, as developing constantly before his eyes, will find himself improving it spontaneously, and the cultivation of a taste for these things will not only be useful, but a fruitful source of simple, unalloyed pleasure.

And here I would impress upon your minds the importance of cultivating the habit of observation—of keeping your eyes and ears open. It is surprising how much more one person will see in a given space than another, from having the faculty of observation, by nature or education, or both these, in a state of superior development. The observing faculty is not only capable of general improvement, but of special bias; which last is well if it does not become excessive; but we must take care that we do not come to see the thing we wish or expect, whether it be there or not. There are some who are not especially deficient in the ability to investigate thoroughly, but neglect it from mere laziness. To such I can only say, repent and convert yourselves, for the enemy of all righteousness would be no more out of place in Paradise, than a lazy man in the profession of medicine.

But he who is conscious of natural or educational deficiency in this particular, should form the habit of bending his mind to the careful examination not only of the diseases which he may be called to treat, but also the various natural phenomena that are everywhere presented to his observation; and he should investigate nature in all her varied and interesting processes going on around him. Thus he will be qualified not only to form promptly a correct opinion of the nature and essential characteristics of diseases, but will estimate truly the result of his efforts to effect their cure.

The ability to generalize facts already obtained or observed, is of the greatest importance in the making up of a good physician; and without it, the mind is liable to be in the condition of an overloaded stomach, that has not power to digest its contents. This, too, is greatly susceptible of improvement, and may be almost created by persevering effort.

To observe and analyze, to collect and generalize, should become a second nature to the physician; and his mind should be so trained and accustomed to the process, that it will act, as it were, spontaneously.

There is scarce any limit to the number and variety of objects and circumstances that present themselves for the observation and investigation of the ordinary practitioner, to say nothing of the vast undiscovered region that invites the special searcher into the yet hidden secrets of the deep and comprehensive science of medicine. Not only is it necessary to diagnose individual diseases and cases, and understand and appreciate their general and special characteristics, but at every step, and on every hand, are presented subjects which, though of a more general nature, are no less important and essential to a large and continuous success.

The diathesis of a given period or region; the characteristics of a prevailing epidemic; the effect of epidemic influences upon ordinary diseases, or upon special endemic diseases; the effects of local endemic influences upon epidemics; the effect of peculiar local causes in extended or circumscribed neighborhoods upon the general health and constitutional stamina of the inhabitants, and in producing or modifying their diseases; the effect of hereditary tendencies, and family and constitutional diathesis, and of occupation and modes of living, are some of the questions that must be met and examined continually, and their right solution must influence, more or less, the daily practice of every truly successful physician.

Self-possession is another quality very essential, in fact indispensable, to the physician. The coolness and collectedness which come from long and careful mental control, are the most reliable, and their exhibition in trying emergencies will ever command the admiration of mankind.

You will often be placed in situations where everything around you has a tendency to excite you and throw you off your balance; but, when the safety of the patient depends not only upon your keeping cool yourself, but also upon your being able to quiet the tumult around you; and he is not the man for the place who cannot calmly look all the danger in the

face, and adopt his measures with promptness and decision, but without hurry and excitement.

There is many a case where impulsive precipitancy will jeopard all ; calm self-possession save all. But, on the other hand, there are some minds so tempered that their organic sin is a want of energy and decision ; and the tendency with them is to let the critical moment go by—the favorable and important opportunity slip—and they are never aroused in season, never ready till it is too late. Boldness, when you know whereon you stand and have measured well your antagonist, is a great virtue ; but do not mistake for it rashness, which is an unpardonable vice. Carefulness is not incompatible with boldness, energy, and promptness ; but do not mistake inaction or timidity for it. It is an excellent rule to do nothing when you do not know what to do, but you should question yourself closely whether you are not justly blamable for not knowing.

There is a class of practitioners of whom it is said, that they never do any harm, if they do no good, they are so careful ; but while there are probably more sins of commission than omission in the practice of medicine, yet I can see no reason why the guilt of the former should be deemed greater than that of the latter.

There is great need that you cherish a proper self-respect, and cultivate a manly independence of character. It seems to me that no one thing has done more to belittle the profession of medicine than a manifest tendency in many of its members to sacrifice their own proper manliness to the one idea of success in getting and retaining practice ; the result of which has been that some communities have come to look upon the physician as their very humble servant, greatly beholden to them, dependent upon them for his daily bread, and bound to think and act just like all his patrons, or not to think and act at all. I would by no means advise you to be active, loud-talking politicians, or valiant defenders of some hair-splitting theological dogma, or meddling with the thousand issues that float on the surface of popular opinion, or without discretion casting pearls before swine at every opportunity ; but I would have you just what any gentlemanly, high-minded man would be in any

other business. Do not sacrifice anything that properly belongs to you as a free man, in the best sense of the term, for the sake of pleasing anybody. The community in which you live will be prone to forget many rights that should be very dear to you, unless you quietly, but firmly, assert them. And I cannot forbear to mention one that should be especially precious to you all—the right of the first day of the week as a day of rest and religious worship. Not that you should neglect any important case on that day; but in some communities, unless you teach them better, you will have business heaped upon you that should have been done during the previous week, or could be deferred without detriment to the succeeding secular days; will be treated as if you were entirely without the pale of the Christian church, or belonged to that mythical order of beings that have very useful bodies, but no souls. If there is any special class of men to which the Lord's day should come with its healing, soothing, soul-elevating influences, it is that the business of whose members makes them daily conversant with scenes that sadden the spirit; that see the brightest earthly hopes constantly being wrecked in the breakers of the dark river; and the spark of human life going out into thick darkness, that nothing but the religion of Him who has said, "I am the Resurrection and the Life," can penetrate and dispel.

There is no calling in which a high sense of honor is more necessary than the one which you have chosen; and without an ever-watchful cultivation of it, you will find many a temptation too strong for you; and in after life you will find your memory burdened with errors and sins, which, however much you may regret, you cannot wipe away.

Whatever is dishonorable in your intercourse with the community, in your relation of physician to those who place their confidence in you, or in your intercourse with or relation to brethren of your profession, will leave its worst effects upon yourselves.

You have high trusts committed to you; do not betray them. You have choicest treasures confided to you; keep them faithfully.

Always remember, that whatever degrades any member of the profession, does, in a measure, affect the whole.

Never allow an unfounded aspersion of another physician's character to circulate by your silence, be he ever so great a rival, or whatever be his short comings towards yourself; and in all things try to do as you ought to wish to be done by.

I would have you cultivate a sincere and unselfish love of your profession.

If you have chosen medicine with a view to mere pecuniary emolument, or for its respectability, or for any other common motive, or, if having been thus actuated in your choice at the outset, you have not found growing up in you a higher feeling with regard to it, I advise you to pause at the threshold, while your age and habits will admit of your adopting some other business, for you are utterly unfit for this.

The interests connected with the art of healing are so varied, the responsibilities so weighty, the occasions and means of doing good so numerous, and the liability to do evil so great, that no mere mercenary motive will ever suffice to make the higher and desirable type of the physician.

There must be love of medicine as a science; there must be love of it as an art. There must be a heart to exult when a new truth is discovered, when a fresh victory over disease is achieved, when the load of human suffering is lightened ever so little.

A man that would think more of receiving a large fee than of having carried a patient safely through a dangerous disease, or saved a life, however humble, by a successful operation, is not fit to be a physician.

The man that would value higher a popular reputation, no matter how obtained, because it led to increase of business and wealth, than the consciousness that he has been made an instrument in the hand of God of achieving great good in the practice of his profession, is not fit for a physician.

Seek to become thoroughly acquainted with your profession in all its aspects; for it is only by this, that you can appreciate it properly, and love it as you ought, and the more you know of it, and of the noble and devoted men who have been found

from time to time in its ranks, the stronger will be your attachment to it, and the firmer will be your determination to do nothing that shall disgrace it.

A cardinal virtue in the good physician's character, is kind-heartedness.

It has always seemed to me to be a dreadful thing to grow cold and stony-hearted, to be unmoved by the sorrows and miseries of our fellow sojourners here, and to be doing one's bare duties in a frigid and unsympathizing manner, yet, there is danger of this.

If we are always looking on the wrong side of things, if we move among our fellows with soured, and prejudiced, and suspicious feeling, it will all be reflected back upon us. We must habituate ourselves to look upon our fellow-man, not as being his judge, but in a certain sense as his savior; and wherever we see the image of our Maker, however fallen and degraded, there we must see an object of commiseration, to be pitied and looked kindly upon, and spoken to with gentleness and love.

I cannot conceive of a human being, lying sick, weak, and suffering, who should not be treated compassionately and tenderly by his physician.

But do not mistake me as recommending nervous weak-heartedness, which many confound with true tenderness and kindness of feeling; for they are not only unlike, but almost incompatible.

The truly brave are truly gentle and kind, and often we see the tender and sensitive mind exhibit a firmness and reliability truly admirable, where coarser and rougher natures are unmannered, unreliable.

As an example in proof of the perfect compatibility of the quality under consideration, with strength of nerve and resoluteness of mind, I cannot do better than refer you to the character of the honored and loved Professor, who was present on a like occasion to this, one year ago, but who has since closed his active and useful life, and, we trust, has entered upon an infinitely higher and more glorious career in the life which is eternal. That he was strong of nerve and resolute of pur-

pose many of you have seen; that he was kind of heart and gentle of spirit many of you have known and experienced; and if other proofs were needed it would be sufficient to remember that he was the father of that sainted daughter who also graced with her presence our last year's gathering here, but is now reunited with her beloved parents in the land of the blessed.

Undoubtedly you will meet with ingratitude and injury, where you should have received thankfulness and just appreciation; and if you allow yourself to treasure up, and dwell upon, all the real and apparent wrongs that you receive in your professional intercourse with the community, made up as it is of an almost endless variety of character and dispositions, you will, ere you are aware, carry the marks on your countenance, and feel their effects settling down into your heart, drying up the springs of kindness and sympathy which should be ever welling up there toward all the members of our common fallen humanity.

But if you cherish kindly feelings, look upon all, whatever their character, and however great their ingratitude, as objects of compassion thrown in your way by your Creator, for you to do them good, and in doing them good, to experience a reflex good in your own soul. If you go steadily onward, gently sowing good seed in every soil, "casting your bread upon the waters," you will find roses blooming all along your path, where you perhaps expected thorns alone, and where you surely would have found them if you had pursued an opposite course.

And many a time, in after years, you will find that your kind words have been remembered, your good offices appreciated, and that the little seed of gratitude germinated in some poor heart, has brought forth fruit not only towards yourself, but towards a kinder and better friend long forgotten and neglected.

But this quality cannot be counterfeited. If it is not at the fountain no artificial sweetening will make the waters any the less insipid or bitter. Nor need you be solicitous with regard to its outward expression, for only be sure that all is right

within, and its exhibition will be spontaneous, and in many cases will be a more efficacious balm than any that could be selected from the most comprehensive pharmacopæa.

As a crowning qualification for a good physician, cultivate sincere and earnest piety, piety that will control all your actions and all your intercourse, professional and otherwise; sanctifying all your knowledge, fitting you for the highest usefulness here, and giving you a well grounded hope beyond the grave.

Finally, in all things let your watchword be improvement; look forward to a life of constant progress, in which all that is good in you shall be more and more developed and matured, and all that is faulty and evil in you shall be struggled against and overcome; and when it shall close, whether sooner or later, you will have the consolation of feeling that you have not lived in vain, and that many grateful hearts shall bless your memory.

